

The Stoic Conception of Self

César Avilés

This essay studies the Stoic conception of self and its affiliation with the soul and physical body. I also delve into five spiritual exercises that may help nurture a self capable of embarking on mystical journeys, the calling of the new Stoic monk.

The Stoic Soul-Self

To figure out the Stoic conception of self, we need to begin with the Stoic Universe. Everything in the Stoic Cosmos is made of God, technically, the active principle. Matter is associated with the passive principle, and it's also made of God. In the Stoic Universe, neither principle can exist without the other.

In humans, the soul acts as active principle, whereas the body is matter shaped by the soul. Although the soul and body make our earthly composition, this mixture is *not* the Stoic self. For the Stoics, the self is a part of the soul they called *hegemonikon* or ruling faculty.

As the body and its senses redirect impressions toward the *hegemonikon*, the latter chooses how to interpret those impressions. Ultimately, Stoic training aims to shape that choice. Moreover, our body-soul union, which I call "earthly existence," is the most complex in the Stoic Cosmos. This means we humans have more "God" in our composition than any other body in the Universe. Such an elaborate constitution makes us highly spiritual beings with the same reason as the gods.

According to the Stoics, humans share the Cosmos with other bodies belonging to four Nature levels. Each level—actually, each body—has a specific tension and rank of complexity. The first level is the most basic and contains almost no God in it. Stones, for example, belong in this group. They are held together by hexis. Flowers, plants, and trees also gain coherence from hexis, but they grow, a quality of the second level of Nature, phusis. The third level contains both hexis and phusis. But also soul or *psychê*; non-rational animals belong to this level. Finally, rationality, or *nous*, is the level reached

by a human adult. At this point, the rational adult develops an eight-part soul, two of which contain reason: the hegemonikon (ruling part) and the reproductive faculty¹. The latter, however, is the only detachable part of the soul² and how parents contribute their seeds to make a new one.

Before dealing with parental seeds, it's necessary to point out how the Stoic Cosmos "generates" humans. In the Stoic view, the Cosmos is rational and endowed with a hegemonikon, a ruling part, housed in the World Soul. But unlike us humans, the hegemonikon of the Cosmos does not need to combine two seeds to generate a new one. Instead, the World Soul detaches individual seeds that generate all kinds of matter and physical bodies with different tensions and complexities. Each detached seed has encoded information with the potential of each body. For example, the seed of a stone has the encoded potential of being coherent (hexis) but not the potential to grow as plants do (phusis). In turn, plants grow but do not have the encoded potential of acquiring a soul (psuchê) as animals do. Animals can obtain a soul but never nous or rationality. Finally, humans have the encoded potential of developing rationality once they become adults, but interestingly, they still consist of all four levels of Nature: hexis, phusis, psuchê, and nous³.

While an embryo, the human seed grows just like a plant (hexis and phusis), but "as gestation progresses the phusis pneuma is said to become 'finer', and at birth this pneuma changes into soul⁴." However, the human function of phusis at embryo-state is different than that of plants. That's because it's informed by capacities of sensation and impulse⁵. Even though totally blended, the soul and body each preserve their own substance and qualities. So, in theory, the body and soul could be separated again at death.

This short introduction now leads us to a more difficult question. If our "earthly existence" is a composite of soul and body following Stoic

¹ Gourinat, Jean-Baptiste. "Apospasma: The World Soul and its individual parts in Stoicism". *World Soul – Anima Mundi*, edited by Christoph Helmig, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 180

² Gourinat, Jean-Baptiste. "Apospasma: The World Soul and its individual parts in Stoicism". *World Soul – Anima Mundi*, edited by Christoph Helmig, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, p. 182

³ Our phusis constitution, for example, stays evident in the growth of our nails and hair. See: Lewis, Eric. "The Stoics on Identity and Individuation." *Phronesis*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1995, p. 100. *Crossref*, doi:10.1163/156852895321052026.

⁴ Long, A. A. "Soul and Body in Stoicism." *Phronesis*, vol. 27, no. 1–2, 1982, p. 43. *Crossref*, doi:10.1163/156852882x00032.

⁵ Gill, Christopher. "Psychophysical Holism in Stoicism and Epicureanism." *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought*, 2006, p. 214. *Crossref*, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198152682.003.0001.

psychophysical holism⁶, how important is each of its components? Don't the Stoics say that the health of the body is an indifferent? And why would the soul, being all reason, join a delicate body in the first place?

Soul-Self and Expanded-Self

Cleanthes subscribed to the view that personal identity is grounded in the soul alone⁷. His student Chrysippus, on the other hand, believed that personal identity is the result of the properties of both the body and soul. For him, "the destruction of personal identity must be the separation of the body and the soul, that is, death, despite the fact that the soul still exists after this separation⁸."

Despite the soul-self changing (or not) its identity after entering and leaving the body, the soul's primary substance remains the same for the Stoics. The identity, or what I call "earthly existence," may (or not) vary depending on the body it inhabits, but the self as the main component of personhood remains intact—just like when one takes a hair cut one feels and looks different; however one retains the same self.

Pierre Hadot asserts that in Stoicism, the terms "soul," "self," "hegemonikon," the intellect ("nous"), the power of reflection ("dianoia"), and the "inner daimon" are all synonyms⁹. So if the body and soul are separable, and one has more God than the other, why would Nature demand this union? Perhaps the answer lies in the Stoic belief in daimones¹⁰.

Up to Posidonius, Stoics believed that the inner daimon is our own embodied rational soul and that external daimones existed as psychic entities of non-human origin¹¹. Another belief of theirs was that external daimones

⁶ Sellars, John. "Soul and Emotion." *Marcus Aurelius (Philosophy in the Roman World)*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2020, p. 85.

⁷ Celkyte, Aiste. "The Soul and Personal Identity in Early Stoicism: Two Theories?" *Apeiron*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2020, p. 474. Crossref, doi:10.1515/apeiron-2017-0038.

⁸ Celkyte, Aiste. "The Soul and Personal Identity in Early Stoicism: Two Theories?" *Apeiron*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2020, p. 474. Crossref, doi:10.1515/apeiron-2017-0038.

⁹ Hadot, Pierre. "The Inner Citadel, or the Discipline Of Assent." *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* by Pierre Hadot, Harvard University Press, 2021, pp. 122–23.

¹⁰ The term daimon must be used carefully for in antiquity it meant intermediary messenger, tutelary guide, fate, reason (as divine spark), evil spirit, luck, hunch, and intuition. See: Dyson, Henry. "The God Within: The Normative Self in Epictetus." *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2009, pp. 235. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27745161. Accessed 1 July 2021.

¹¹ Algra, Keimpe. "Stoics on souls and demons: Reconstructing Stoic demonology". *Body and Soul in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by Dorothea Frede and Burkhard Reis, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009, pp. 384–385. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110216523.5.359>

were the soul of the wise, and a subspecies of external daimones. These would roam through the air as psychic entities serving as guardians and overseers of man¹². Yet, for Seneca, the inner daimon still cannot compare to the speculative nature of an external daimon.

"Lay aside for the present the belief...that a god [daimon] is assigned to each one of us as a sort of attendant... Later on we shall investigate whether the gods have enough time on their hands to care for the concerns of private individuals; in the meantime, you must know that whether we are allotted to special guardians, or whether we are neglected and consigned to Fortune, you can curse a man with no heavier curse than to pray that he may be at enmity with himself¹³."

The Stoic philosopher does not need to believe in an external daimon to ensure purposefulness, dignity, serenity, and social utility. His philosophy of life is enough to attain these fundamentals of wellbeing. Nevertheless, the Greek Stoics held tightly to the idea of external daimones? Why? One reason may be the customs of their time. Another could be the portrait of Socrates. Although a sage and brilliant man, Socrates welcomed the advice of an apparent external daimon, receiving "knowledge of what actions will lead to future harmful or unbeneficial outcomes that he would never have known beforehand by his own human reasoning¹⁴."

If everyone has appointed an external daimon like Socrates claimed he did, then this external entity's job may be to aid the inner daimon (soul-self) gain a higher tension (*tonos*), namely, growth and development of self. And it could be that the only way to acquire this level of wisdom is through a physical body. Such an external entity, a helper who is in cosmic sympathy with one's inner daimon (soul-self) and wants what the soul-self wants, then becomes an expanded-self. This view was embraced by Alton R. Pope in his master thesis on the Daimonion of Socrates. He wrote:

"the daimonion seems to have combined both subjective and objective elements in its nature. There is reason to suggest, that it had a real existence,

¹² Algra, Keimpe. "Stoics on souls and demons: Reconstructing Stoic demonology". *Body and Soul in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by Dorothea Frede and Burkhard Reis, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2009, pp. 384–385. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110216523.5.359>

¹³ Letter 110

¹⁴ Kenny, Philip. "Socratic Knowledge and the Daimonion." *Aporia*, vol. Vol. 13, no. number 1, 2003, p. 34.

both within Socrates himself and also apart from Socrates. The daimonion was one important aspect of his own personality, though without the insights of modern psychology he himself could not realize this. As a man of his time he could not make in one leap the transition from external authority to personal freedom in thought and action. To bridge the gap, the daimonion functioned as a "necessary limit" on his subjectivity, helping him to accept his own intellectual and moral autonomy against the traditional reliance on custom and outside authority. Yet, granted this, there appears to be an objectivity in the nature of the daimonion which warns against hastily reducing it simply to Socrates himself. It is difficult to believe that he would have responded with such reverence and obedience to monitions arising solely from within himself, even if from a sub-conscious self he could barely conceive. On the assumptions of this study, there are grounds for the hypothesis that the daimonion was from an objective, possibly divine source, as well as within Socrates¹⁵."

Although the inner and outer daimones may be working together on an unconscious level, it may be possible to move this alliance to a conscious setting. In the next section, I argue that a healthy soul-self could help bring this daimon union to a conscious level and further prepare the soul for mystical exploration, the calling of the new Stoic monk.

The Health of the Soul-Self

The Stoics preserved the health of their souls with spiritual exercises like *anachoresis*, a form of *prosoche*, or attention, to make one aware of incoming impressions, judgments, and choices within one's mind¹⁶. Pierre Hadot calls it a "purely rational, imaginative, and intuitive¹⁷ retreat within oneself to control inner discourse[...and] render it coherent¹⁸." Consequently, Stoic anachoresis is a contemplation exercise, a break from ordinary routine to gather oneself, think clearly, and plan for completely correct actions.

Anachoresis as a form of *prosoche*, or attention, serves as an awareness

¹⁵ "Daimonion of Socrates : A Search for Definition and an Epistemological Assessment : Pope, Alton R. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive, 1969, archive.org/details/daimonionofsocra00pope/page/n1/mode/2upPages 360-363

¹⁶ Sellars, John. "Soul and Emotion." *Marcus Aurelius (Philosophy in the Roman World)*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2020, p. 87.

¹⁷ Hadot, Pierre. "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy." *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p. 59.

¹⁸ Hadot, Pierre. "Spiritual Exercises." *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p. 85.

exercise to keep principles at hand. And the new Stoic monk, as a philosopher, also practices it for this reason. But he may also profit from the byproduct of anachoresis, namely, a "quiet" soul.

Plutarch held that "a calm willingness to be guided, undisturbed by passions, [was] a prerequisite for inspiration by the daimon¹⁹." We see it in Socrates, whose passionless soul is said to have aided his daimon contact.

"In the case of an exceptional individual, like Socrates, communication from the divine source occurs without constraint. Such a recipient's intellect is not impacted by vocalized sounds but simply "touched" by the thought that is being transmitted. Undisturbed by passion, the exceptional soul allows itself to be freely 'relaxed or tensed' by the superior intellect's intervention²⁰."

E.L. Sudworth best explains the mechanics behind a possible contact with one's daimon in his book *Creation in Stasis* (quote):

"If we look at the First Law of Thermodynamics, and the law of conservation of energy, we learn that electricity can change forms and it can flow from one place to another. Therefore, God sending an electrical signal in the form of a thought to your brain is not only easy, but it works within the rules of operation that He put in place when He created the universe²¹."

Suppose a passionless and tranquil soul does help discern the counseling of external daimones. In that case, the practice of anachoresis combined with some form of meditation may serve as a starting point to advance the monk's mission. I now propose a new model of anachoresis with this end in mind.

Anachoresis Pentad

In the Stoic view, humans are made for one another. A physical retreat—Epicurus style—is an act against Nature. Thus, even the kind of physical retreat pursued by the forthcoming Desert Fathers, who withdrew to the desert to avoid passions, procure knowledge, and live a venerable way of life²², would not fit the Stoic view of Nature.

¹⁹ Plutarch, et al. "De Genio Socratis." *On the Daimonion of Socrates: Human Liberation, Divine Guidance and Philosophy* (Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris Ad Ethicam Religionemque Peritenentia), Mohr Siebeck, 2010, p. 165.

²⁰ Long, A. A. "How Does Socrates' Divine Sign Communicate with Him?" *A Companion to Socrates*, 2005, p. 71.

²¹ Sudworth, E. L. "A Creation in Stasis." *Creation In Stasis: A Regular Persons Guide To Understanding Why We Exist and How We Got Here*, 2nd ed., e-book, E.L. Sudworth, 2016, p. 58.

²² Athanasius, and Ellershaw. *The Life of Antony*. H. Ellershaw, 2013 Location 667

If Stoic monks ever existed and followed the conventional stereotype of solitude, then it must have been a short physical retreat to refresh the self before returning to their duties *in* the world. This was clear to Marcus Aurelius, who became one of the highest advocates of cosmopolitanism. Marcus wrote Stoic doctrines down as hypomnemata, or notes to self, to remind himself repeatedly (among other themes) that men were made for one another²³. We can assume that he learned some of his writings by heart, for memory exercises, or *mneme* was another Stoic exercise that actuated as anachoresis. The goal of all these spiritual exercises was to develop a fit soul-self that can act right under *any* circumstances.

I shall call this ancient Triad of exercises (contemplation, hypomnemata, and mneme) Anachoresis Triad (AT) to differentiate it from a new variant I offer below. My aim is not to change the ancient Triad but to conserve and protect its prosperity from two potential pitfalls:

- 1) the hesitance of daily AT practice, and
- 2) the unawareness of harmful thoughts, images, and noises produced by the hegemonikon from within itself.

To begin describing this new layout, I'd like to bring to the attention the work of Abbot Erik Wiegardt: *Pneuma Will Power Meditation (PWPM)*. This manual was designed with Stoics in mind to strengthen the will. PWPM can be a pillar to AT by encouraging the monk to resist uncomfortable feelings during meditation or inner retreat. Ab. Wiegardt's manual also reveals the importance of scrutinizing one's thoughts and self-constructed images (pitfall 2). His work can potentially fortify the hegemonikon from within as it learns to reshape its own generated thoughts. To complement PWPM we now turn to Elen Buzaré's bold reconstruction of Stoic meditation.

In an old Hesychastic prayer, Buzaré found the Stoic theory of Nature's inner levels (*scala naturae*): *hexis*, *physis*, *psuche*, and *nous*. It's not clear whether she believes the Stoics meditated on each level separately or together in one session. Despite that, her "nous level" meditation may be an indispensable addition to AT. She wrote,

²³ Meditations 8.59

"The goal [of the nous level meditation] is to avoid that the hegemonikon gets attached to external things, 'putting away from itself' the multiples sensory and non sensory impressions in order not to be carried by them. Our guiding principle must be trained not to attach itself to sensory and non sensory impressions that may be received. In other words, we should train ourselves to what modern therapists call cognitive distance. For example, there is a difference between being conscious of a thought and being attached to a thought. This difference, subtle, expresses well itself in terms of sensation or texture. A thought you are simply attentive to is felt as being very light in texture. There is a feeling of distance between this thought and the consciousness which perceive it. It appears and disappear without inevitably giving birth to the following one. The ordinary thought, the one to which we get attached to, is of a heavier texture: it sucks up us and takes control of our guiding principle. It is obsessional by Nature and leads directly to the next impression in the causation chain we have already talked about. The same principle applies to physical sensations, outside noises, inside noises, etc²⁴."

Finally, these two additions make five spiritual exercises (PWPM, contemplation, hypomnemata, mneme, and Nous Meditation) that complement and strengthen one another. I shall call this extended version: Anachoresis Pentad (AP). To my mind, this extension is stronger than Anachoresis Triad alone for the reasons mentioned above.

In conclusion, the Stoic self is the hegemonikon of the soul and blends with the body throughout our "earthly existence," possibly to gain more divinity and *tonos* from the challenges of accomplishing our duties. The self-soul is also the inner daimon, which shares the faculty of reason with the Gods. The health of this inner daimon is maintained with spiritual exercises to ensure a higher success rate of "completely correct actions" and thus gain more *tonos*. The foundation of Stoicism may be Anachoresis Triad (AT) along with *prosoche*. Moreover, with the addition of two meditative practices, AT becomes Anachoresis Pentad (AP), possibly aiding daimon contact and thus the practitioner's mystical aptitude. The external daimon may also be considered an expanded self, for it wants what the inner self (inner daimon) wants. Their input might transcend the limitations of our "earthly existence" and possibly assist us—as it did with Socrates—with the completion and

²⁴ Buzaré, Elen. "ANAKHORESIS." Modern Stoicism, 2015, modernstoicism.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Anakhoresis-in-english.pdf.

success of our duties and mission.